The Chronicle of Higher Education

Monday, January 5, 2009

Economist Describes a Missing Pool of Low-Income College Applicants

By DAVID GLENN

Each year thousands of high-achieving students from low-income families do not apply to selective colleges that would almost certainly accept them, according to a paper presented here on Saturday during the annual meeting of the American Economic Association.

Most such students do attend college somewhere—often at nonselective institutions where the median SAT score is hundreds of points below their own. But they miss out on the challenging course work and valuable career networks that a selective college might provide. And ironically, they might actually pay more for their education, because some elite colleges now offer extensive financial aid to students from low-income families.

"There is a large supply of low-income, high-achieving students who just do not apply at all to selective colleges and universities," said Caroline M. Hoxby, a professor of economics at Stanford University, during a panel discussion of the economics of college-going.

And that matters, Ms. Hoxby said, both because elite colleges ought to be more economically diverse and because the students' own interests would be better served if they chose more-selective colleges.

Missed Advantages

"We know that at a given level of high-school achievement, a low-income student who attends a more-selective college is more likely to graduate on time, more likely to be employed, and more likely to have high earnings after graduation," Ms. Hoxby said. "I'm not saying that all of those relationships are causal. But even if they're only partly causal, it seems worthwhile to get more of these students into selective colleges."

Ms. Hoxby and Christopher N. Avery, a professor of public policy at Harvard University, obtained a huge cache of data from the College Board, which allowed them to analyze the entire population of students who took the SAT in five recent years. The data included test scores, high-school grades, and the names of the colleges where the students asked the College Board to send their scores (which is a close proxy for where the students actually applied).

The two scholars used a variety of methods, including block-level census data, to estimate each student's household income. In their paper they define a family as "low income" if its income is below the 30th percentile, which is around $28,000. They define a student as high-achieving if

the student had combined SAT scores above 1200, a high-school grade point average of B-plus or better, and at least one Advanced Placement score of 4 or 5 (or an equivalently high score on an SAT subject-area test).

In one typical recent year, Ms. Hoxby said, there were roughly 21,000 high-achieving students from low-income families. But more than 60 percent of those students did not make any "ambitious applications," the study found.

Ms. Hoxby and Mr. Avery regarded an application as ambitious if the college's median combined SAT score was no more than five percentiles below the student's own score. "Notice that that's a very broad definition," Ms. Hoxby said. "I'm not saying that you're applying to a school where you would be below the median."

But even under that generous definition, Ms. Hoxby and Mr. Avery found that a large majority of those students did not make any ambitious applications. Instead, they typically applied to nonselective (or only slightly selective) public institutions close to their homes.

High-achieving students from affluent families, the study found, are much more likely to apply to colleges that are appropriate for their SAT scores and high-school grades.

"So why don't these low-income students apply to selective colleges?" Ms. Hoxby asked. "What is the point of studying hard in high school and taking the SAT if you're not going to apply to selective colleges that would accept you?"

Influence of Geography

After sifting through the data, Ms. Hoxby and Mr. Avery have tentatively concluded that the low-income students who are least likely to make ambitious applications live in small towns and rural areas where they are relatively isolated.

"Think of a high-achieving, low-income student in New York City," Ms. Hoxby said. "That student is going to get swept up into the magnet-school system and attend high school at some place like Stuyvesant. That student will have a very high probability of attending a selective college. But most low-income students are not in places like that. A student might be in a small school district where teachers and counselors just don't have any experience in advising students about selective colleges. So these students are poorly informed about their college opportunities, and they have few allies."

Ms. Hoxby and Sarah E. Turner, a professor of economics and education at the University of Virginia, are planning a series of experiments in which school districts will give low-income students and their parents new kinds of information about the process—and the potential benefits—of applying to selective colleges.

An audience member asked whether interventions like those wouldn't simply replicate the federal Gear Up program and the many other programs that encourage college-going among low-

income students. Ms. Turner answered that those programs are typically aimed at persuading lower-achieving students to consider going to college at all.

“The package of information that one wants to give a student who’s on the margin of dropping out of high school,” she said, “is very different than the kind of information that would be useful to a high-achieving student about applying to selective colleges.”